

FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT

INTRODUCTION

Today is the beginning of a series of sermons in which I will attempt to lay before us some of the major commitments of the spiritual journey. We are doing shoptalk, and we cannot be a strong faith community if we do not share some things about who we are and what we are about.

Many people today do not realize, sometimes for years, that Christianity is a WAY of Life, a WAY to walk. They do not know that progress can be made by taking certain necessary steps. When people come to a church, they are looking for something. I suspect that when we come to church, knowingly or unknowingly we are looking for this Way of Life that the church represents. If in this church we do not know the Way *and walk it*, people will go away empty. Or they will conclude that there is no Way. Or, perhaps worst of all, they will stay here but it will be years before they figure out where the good stuff is. So we need to review from time to time what we are doing, and how we go at it.

Christianity is a wondrous thing – actually the only thing I know that, over time, makes life worth living. But Christianity is also a serious and sometimes dangerous journey, as is made clear by watching anybody who has ever walked the Way. So here comes this series: COMMITMENTS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

Two disclaimers:

1.) Do not go on a guilt trip! If this series turns into a guilt trip, it will accomplish very little for us. So here is the real WARNING: None of us (including me) will sit through this series of sermons on the basic commitments of the Christian Life and go home comfortable with the way we already do them all. I will from time to time try to remind you about the Gospel: We are not saved by doing all the disciplines – we are not saved by perfect performance. We are saved by the mercy and love of Jesus Christ our Savior. Walking the Way is our *response* to this love and mercy, not a substitute for it. Therefore, taking on any of these commitments – taking any of these steps of the

pilgrimage – will backfire if you try to do it out of pride or duty or any motive other than as a response to God’s love and mercy. I hope you believe that. I hope you know I believe that.

So here’s the deal: Try to listen to the whole series with interest and a willingness to consider the possibilities. But actually be watching for one commitment that may be worth adding to the others you already have. Personally look for *just one* of these commitments to walk up, tap you on the shoulder, and say, “May I have this dance?” And if something in you does not respond with eagerness – with some interior excitement – do not do it! It is not time yet.

Of course, part of you will always object to any commitment, no matter how good it is – no matter how much your soul wants it. Any new discipline requires time and energy and effort, and all of us tell ourselves we have no more time right now ... for God or anybody. So I do not mean you should wait until all your excuses go away. That is never going to happen. But watch for the discipline that calls to you and says, “I’m the one you are missing or neglecting. I’m the one that can bring you closer to God and help you make progress on the Path *right now*.”

So no guilt trips. Watch for the inner calling that is laced with an eagerness to be more faithful. If there is no sense of joy, it does not mean the discipline is wrong; it just means it is not time for you. Maybe the next dance.

2.) There is a difference between the fundamental commitments for walking the Christian Life, and the truths and disciplines and principles we discover while walking the Christian Way itself. Frankly, it is a lot more interesting and exciting to talk about the truths and the disciplines and the principles. The basic commitments are a lot more mundane, pragmatic, foundational. For example, there is a difference between considering the commitment to pray every day, and talking about all the things we discover from prayer itself. There is a difference between the commitment to get married, and all the sharing, love, children, squabbles, growth, and learning that take place if you do get married. Only, you cannot get to these unless you commit to the marriage in the first place.

So the commitments are necessary or the rest of the adventure never really happens. I mention this because lots of people in our

time do not know this anymore. They are trying to test and taste and experience Christianity without making any of the basic commitments. It cannot work that way. We live in a culture where people are trying to have a “one-night stand” with God. It is working just about as well as we would expect it to – just about as well as one-night stands ever do.

FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT

In the annals of earth history, who do I know of who has walked through the mists and mazes as if they had a built-in compass? Not very many. Most of them were not perfect, yet no matter how many distractions or how much opposition or confusion, they kept heading back on the same bearing, as if they were seeing what most people around them were not seeing. How did they do it? They all had tradition and community and things they were trying to accomplish, as well as things they were trying to escape from. And thousands of others have too, yet only a few have walked with a very high degree of clarity and commitment.

Your list may be different. Mine is longer than I have time to share with you, but just for a hint: Jacob is on my list. Moses is huge. Jeremiah. Jesus, of course. Peter is fun because he started out so scattered and grew more and more focused as he went. Paul, after he got his aim straightened out, became so focused that even though half the world was shooting at him, it just made him focus all the more. Augustine, Luther, Jonathan Edwards, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln. There are people on my list who are completely out of our tradition. But let’s not get sidetracked while talking about clarity and focus.

What’s the common denominator here? You may have a different list of heroes, so maybe the common denominator for those on your list will be different. But it is obvious to me that the one thing my heroes had in common was prayer. They all spent a lot of time in prayer. They had various things going for them, and various things holding them back. But what is really true of all of them is that they were getting guidance from beyond themselves. They prayed – continually and sincerely.

The first and most important of all our Christian commitments is prayer. If you try to delete prayer from the biblical record, as of course many people do in our time, the result is ludicrous. Have you read the

biblical accounts of Moses recently? He was constantly off alone with God. It became a problem and the people resented it. They built golden calves, planned rebellions, and did all sorts of things to punish Moses for neglecting them. But Moses knew he could not lead the people if he did not follow God.

In our time, many people have deleted serious personal prayer from their own lives, and the result is obvious. They have no peace. They are scattered, over-busy, exhausted. Everybody likes them because they are busy being useful to everyone but God. But their own lives are scattered, and on the inside they often walk close to depression or despair.

Prayer is the first and most important of all our Christian commitments. It is important for us to know this, to put it this way, and to keep remembering that it is true. Why is prayer more important than the Bible, more important than neighbor love, more important than the church or anything else about our Christian WAY of Life? Prayer is the most important because PRAYER IS THE SOURCE. Did people write the Bible first, or pray first? Did Abraham become the Father of Faith, and then start praying? Did Moses free the Children of Israel and give them Torah, and then start praying? Prayer is the source. Everything that matters in our tradition, in the church, and in our Faith comes out of prayer – from communication between God and human beings. We are not smart enough, brave enough, mature enough, or spiritual enough to do this LIFE on our own. We have to have guidance and reassurance and help. We need it constantly. Bible, church, friends, study, and lots of other things can be helpful and huge in their proper place. But core and key to it all is the personal relationship with God. And there is no living relationship with God apart from prayer.

It is true that in America today, people are frequently trying to reverse the order and let prayer be the caboose instead of the engine. Get yourself into a deep hole first, and *then* pray. Go to college, get a job, get deep into a vocation, and *then* start asking God to bless it. Choose a mate, get married, have children, and *then* start praying. Probably none of you will believe this, but I actually know people who grow up, fall in love, propose marriage – even get married – and never ask God what he thinks about it. They never ask the Holy Spirit if this is the right decision. Unbelievable! (I mean, we're all doing so well with marriage, who needs God's help?!) The secret of secular life is to never let God in on the planning. We do it our own way – by our own best light – and then

invite God to come bless it. That is not prayer. That is superstition – wishful thinking. God is our mascot, our genie in a bottle, here to serve us and make us happy and successful.

All genuine prayer is the reverse: We are God's servants. God is the Creator, and life belongs to God, not to us. What does God want of us? How can we spend our lives to please God? "This day and all my days belong to You, O God. Anything You ask of me – if I can get it clear enough to understand what you want of me – I will do it." That is where the Bible came from, as well as the church, neighbor love, and all things truly Christian. PRAYER IS THE SOURCE.

GUIDANCE PRAYER

The trouble with talking about prayer is that a huge array of approaches and practices come under that one word. When we mention prayer, what another person means and what I mean may be worlds apart. And how do I talk about what I mean without seeming to disparage what they mean? Well, many different kinds of prayer have their place and purpose. But primary to all other kinds of prayer is what we will call the PRAYER FOR GUIDANCE. It is an invitation for the Holy Spirit to come direct and guide our lives. With well-deserved humility – aware of all the foibles and booby-traps involved – it is a desire and willingness to let the Holy Spirit out-vote us on the inner council of our lives. True prayer gives God rights – first priority over all our choices and decisions.

I know that red flags just went up all over the place. I know all the abuses of such principles at least as well as you do. I know all the excuses because I have them and use them as much as you do. I know how hard we fight to keep out of the clutches of the God we neither trust nor love. But I also know better than some that bondage goes both ways. Either we are bound to Christ, or we are in bondage to Satan. And insofar as it is to Satan, we pretend not to notice. When we do notice and turn to a new WAY, it is, as Paul says, in fear and trembling.

Nevertheless, Guidance Prayer means I am trying to find out what God wants me to do with my life – and not in a vague, general, generic way. We are talking about the present tense: Today, one day at a time, I am trying to turn my will and my life over to God – seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit – sworn to allegiance and obedience ahead of time.

That is: If God can make it clear to me, I will do it. I can throw a little dust in the air – act dumber than I really am – but it never works for long. Not in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

There is nothing grandiose or eloquent here. We are just trying to let the Holy Spirit in on the actual planning and deployment and execution of our daily lives. Other kinds of prayer are mostly talking; this kind of prayer is mostly listening. Other kinds of prayer take a few minutes; this kind of prayer takes more time than we ever have to give it, and it never really shuts down for long. (I Thessalonians 5:17) Other kinds of prayer order God around; this kind of prayer invites God to order our lives, insofar as we are able to understand and keep ourselves from running away. Other kinds of prayer can occur from time to time and that's fine; if I neglect Guidance Prayer, my whole life reverts from Life in Christ Jesus ... back to me running my own affairs. Sometimes that happens in only a few minutes; certainly in a day or two of neglect, I am back to the old life.

Clearly this is the most important, and also the most difficult, of all the commitments of the Christian Life. It is constantly frustrating to realize how willful I am – how undisciplined and forgetful and rebellious and ungrateful. On the other hand, nothing is as exciting, fulfilling, and full of surprises and gifts and opportunities and blessings as LIFE in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

COMMUNICATION WITH GOD

If you want to know how important prayer really is, start to notice how hard Satan fights to interrupt it, undo it, mock it, discredit it. The most important thing you can do – never mind for the moment what Christ is doing for you – the most important thing YOU can do is set aside extra time each morning to invite the Holy Spirit to direct and manage your day. If you do that (those of you who are not doing it already), you will quickly run into the fight of your life. You think at first that it is an accident, but it is planned and strategic interference. Children, spouses, phones, work – and mostly an unruly mind – all conspire against *true* prayer. Not talking *at* God, but listening for what God might want to say to us – that is the core of prayer. When we try to do this, we quickly discover that we have no time for God – that God is really quite low on the priority list. We do not really want God messing

around in our personal lives. “Get out – keep off” is something we would never normally say to God, but we do not have to say it. We can rig it so that God can never get a word in edgewise. And if he does, we can be sure that we are not listening.

Sometimes I call it the “noise conspiracy.” The Enemy tries to contrive things so that there is never a possibility of silence between us and God. Not always, but most often, the Holy Spirit speaks in the silence – when our hearts and minds are still, and waiting, and listening. This is no secret in our tradition. Jesus gave God lots of silence – time to break through all the distractions, fears, problems, pressures. Forty days and nights. Undivided attention. Little time out, even for eating. The top Ace of all time knew He had to get truly emptied and willing and ready, or God could not make it clear enough for Him to go on with His ministry. Some of us have never given the Holy Spirit one clear hour.

Forty days and nights were only for openers with Jesus. Over and over we hear that afterward, Jesus was all night in prayer; or going apart to a desert place; or heading up to Caesarea Philippi on retreat; or going off to Sidon, clear out of Israel. So what of Jesus’ followers? That is, what of the people who try to follow Jesus by building into their own lives the principles which obviously guided His? Are we people of prayer? Well, yes ... sort of ... maybe. We say some prayers. Only, Jesus did not just *talk* at God – ordering up world peace and justice and fair play for everyone, and offering His own various schemes for fixing all that is wrong down here. Jesus *listened* to God! He listened for – and He listened to. There was not much about fixing everybody else; it was mostly about “What do you want from me?”

The truth is, Christendom is founded on the assumption – the working principle – that there can be communication between human beings and God. You – every single one of you – can be in conversation with the Omnipotent, the Numinous, the Holy One who calls all the worlds into being. All miracles pale to insignificance beside this one. You cannot always get through to the president of the company or to the President of the United States, and sometimes not even to your wife or your children. But you can always get through to the Holy Spirit. The God who created us ... wants to talk with us. The channel is always open from God’s side. The real truth is, God runs around after us all day saying, “Please, please – could I just have a word with you? I can really help if you will let me.”

History is replete with evidence that people do not want to let God get through to them. When it finally dawns on us that God *is really God* – and that maybe God really might communicate with us – well, that is understandably terrifying. Then we have to declare war on silence: Fill every day with noise and activity. Focus on generalities, making sure none of it has very much to do with us personally. Go to bed so tired that if you start to pray, you instantly fall asleep. Fill your schedule so full that even if God wanted to ask a favor, it would obviously be out of the question. Wake up each morning running, so that you cannot even remember your dreams. You can still say your prayers, of course, but do all the talking. And say “Amen” fast at the end so that God has no chance for any input. If we do all the talking, that is not prayer – that is a filibuster. And of course, the purpose of a filibuster is to stop communication – freeze all the processes. Lots of prayer is intended to stop any real communication, not to open ourselves up to it. Some of us even know that studying the Bible can be a way to avoid God. “Don’t bother me, Lord. I’m busy studying Your Word.” *But I’m right here – in person. I’m truly resurrected, and here with you.* “Sorry, we only pay attention if it’s printed on the page.”

Humans are afraid to communicate with God because all of us know (somewhere deep inside) that if we start a true relationship with God, God will take over our lives. It is not, after all, a relationship between equals. Our religion tells us that God loves us, and Jesus tried to make this clear beyond any shadow of a doubt. But what about the possible changes and overhauling that God might consider helpful to us? Like my friend Garland once said: “I had to stop praying for a while. Every time I tried to pray, this voice in my head kept saying, ‘It’s time for you to stop smoking.’ I’ve tried before and never made it, so I had to stop praying.” There are infinite variations on this theme, and all of us know a few of them.

Every person here is afraid of God on some level. That fear is our problem with prayer – and with all our faith. The level of that fear is the ceiling of our prayer life. When we come to realize that this is the real issue, all the confusion starts to clear away. The issues remain, but the confusion clears away. Only to the degree that we truly believe God loves us, can we open our lives to God’s influence. That is why the Gospel of God’s love is central to the Christian Faith. And it is not what we *say* we believe – it is what the soul within really *believes* about God’s

love. That is what counts. If the Cross is just an ancient theory to you – if on the inside you think God is just the Great Chessplayer and you are merely a pawn in the game – expendable, not truly and deeply loved – then you cannot put your life and your will into God’s hands, no matter how hard you try. Every time we go to our prayers, it is as if God says TRUST ME. If we cannot say, “Okay! I’ll do anything You say,” all we get is silence. The problem is, there is no cheating or pretending with this precept. If we do not trust, we cannot pray. We can only filibuster.

Now, let us be very clear: If there is no communication possible between God and human beings, all the rest of Christianity is ridiculous. All the ritual, hymns, creeds, sacrifices, and Christmas pageants do not mean a thing if humans have simply made them all up – if we are merely playing with pretty theories. Either God really does exist and really is trying to get through to us, or nothing in our religion matters. If there is no communication possible between God and human beings, all the rest of Christianity is play-acting. And if there is no communication going on between God and you, then your spiritual journey has not yet begun.

TO PRAY EVERY DAY

Prayer is the first, the most difficult, the most important, the most joyful of all the commitments of the Christian Life. It is also the secret of the New Life in Christ Jesus. It is the source of the joy and inspiration that turned the world upside down those many generations ago. And it still changes the life of any person who tries it. “*Your life is not your own – you were bought with a price.*” (I Corinthians 6:20; 7:23) We cannot really know that and stay the same. We cannot really know that and go on running our own lives.

As noted above, there are lots of different kinds of prayer, and some of them do not need to be done every day. But today we have been talking about one specific foundational kind of prayer: TO PRAY EVERY DAY (Guidance Prayer). We cannot control the Spirit’s coming, but we can provide the time and the invitation. Every morning, before the first cup of coffee, before breakfast, certainly before you leave the house, you check in with God. It is God’s day and God’s life, and God is the *only* one you have to please. If you do not start the day remembering it and clearing the decks, the day will be over and it will not have had much room for God.

So essentially, this every-morning daily prayer is a time to go over your schedule and agenda for the day – in God’s presence. It is essential that we start the prayer reminding ourselves and saying to God: “My life is yours. It is my top priority to live like You want me to – to do what You want me to. If You make anything clear to me, I will respond and obey.” Then you take a little time for God to put thoughts in your mind, if he wants to. Then you think about the day’s obligations, the people you will see, the tasks you have before you. And you give the Holy Spirit a chance to make any additions, deletions, or corrections. You then try to align your attitude and motives to God’s will. And you ask God to go with you through the day, because there will be surprises and interruptions – and maybe some of them will even be coming from God. And you try to leave the channel on “open” for incoming messages throughout the day. And *then* you move into the day.

There are lots of other fine and wonderful things you can add to your morning devotions. I am merely talking about the primary kind of prayer – the hard-core, essential, and basic prerequisite for walking the Christian Way.

Now, I know as well as any of you do that none of us have time to do this. The Almighty, Omnipotent, Omniscient God is not important enough for us to give him a few minutes of our undivided attention each morning. But you *do* have time to get dressed; you wouldn’t dream of leaving the house physically unclothed. Do you really think you can afford to go through your days spiritually unclothed?

Time in The Presence. Do we really have more important things to do? Is there any place on earth more comforting – more exciting – more joyous? It seems so to many who have never tried it. PRAYER is the first and most important commitment of the Christian Life. It is *necessary* for us as Christians to pray every day.